

Australia: 7,000 Toll truck drivers to strike over pay and conditions

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Around 7,000 Toll truck drivers will strike for 24 hours on Friday. The nationwide strike was called on Monday after 94 percent of Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at the company voted in favour of industrial action.

The dispute is over a new enterprise agreement (EA), currently being negotiated between Toll and the TWU. The previous EA expired in June 2020, but bargaining was deferred until April 2021 in a union-management deal that also allowed the company to slash jobs in the event of any downturn in volume as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In exchange, workers were granted ten days paid pandemic leave.

In fact, Toll's annual revenue increased by almost one third to \$6.3 billion for the year ending March 2021, while workers were subjected to a pay freeze as a result of the delayed negotiations.

The company responded to the workers' vote to strike with a marginally increased pay rise offer, up from 1.5 percent in 2021 and 1.75 in 2022 to 2 percent each year. The TWU has made no explicit mention of this bump, merely characterising the pay offer as "unacceptably low," indicating that it may push workers to sign on to a figure short of the meagre 3 percent the union has previously demanded.

In key disputes over recent months, including at General Mills and McCormick Foods, unions have presented 3 percent (or "almost" 3 percent) annual pay rises as victories. In current negotiations with Australia Post, the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) has proudly noted that it is twice the national average.

These claims serve only as an indictment of the massive assault being carried out against the Australian working class, accelerated by the pandemic and enforced by the trade unions.

In real terms, 3 percent is a pay *cut*, especially given that Toll workers, like those at Australia Post, did not receive a pay rise at all last year. The Australian Bureau of Statistics last month announced a 3.8 percent rise in the Consumer Price Index, which vastly underestimates increases in the cost of living, for the year to June 30.

The union is also calling for a 0.25 point increase in employer superannuation contributions to 15 percent.

Toll has backed down on moves to implement a "B rate" tiered wage system under which new hires would receive up to

30 percent less than the rates paid to existing workers. The company's proposal to introduce fixed term contracts, a proposal which has not been rescinded, still threatens secure, full-time jobs.

While the company has walked back a plan to stop paying overtime rates to part-time drivers working less than 38 hours per week, Toll still plans to pay ordinary rates if these workers "volunteer" for overtime.

The TWU complains of the company's "rejection of limits on outside hire and real commitments to full utilisation," but in reality this simply means the retention of conditions signed off on by the TWU in previous EAs.

Clause 17 of the 2017 agreement states, in part: "Toll commits (a) to the full-time engagement of its Transport Workers *wherever possible*; (b) *subject to reasonable practical requirements*, such as adequately servicing industry peaks, to promote job security through the full utilisation of full-time permanent Transport Workers/Owner-Drivers before the engagement of part-time Transport Workers/Owner-Drivers, or casual Transport Workers/Owner-Drivers or Outside Hire." [Emphasis added]

In other words, Toll is "committed" to nothing. Under the current union-management agreement, the company has carte blanche to declare that "reasonable practical requirements" mean it is not "possible" to offer overtime hours to full-time drivers in preference to cheaper part-time, casual, contract, or outsourced labour.

The fact that so many of the union's claims relate to overtime payments is itself an indictment of the union's role over decades in creating a situation in which workers cannot live on their base rates and are forced to consistently work dangerously long hours to make ends meet.

The proliferation of casual, contract, labour-hire and other insecure forms of work has been facilitated by the unions since it began under the Hawke-Keating Labor government Accords of the 1980s and 1990s.

In recent years the TWU has promoted illusions that the rampant abuse of these work arrangements could be fought in the courts or through parliamentary reforms. The bankruptcy of this perspective of appealing to the bourgeois state was borne out earlier this month when the High Court ruling upheld the

primacy of “freedom of contract” over the “true nature of the employment relationship.” Far from protecting workers’ conditions, the High Court has now enshrined in law that workers are completely at the mercy of their employers and their contracts.

Following the principle of “never let a good crisis go to waste,” Toll Global Express President Alan Beacham said: “Threatening industrial action at a time when our country is in the middle of a global pandemic is playing politics with people’s lives and jobs.”

This suggestion that drivers should be deprived of the basic right to defend their working conditions because of a pandemic that they have been forced to work through is particularly filthy given that the Global Express courier division is being sold “in the middle of a global pandemic.” Toll has refused to guarantee that Global Express workers’ pay and conditions will be maintained after the sale to private equity firm Allegro Funds.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt used Wednesday’s parliamentary “question time” to divert responsibility for the disastrous vaccine roll out onto Toll workers.

Hunt said: “I would also note that there is one element which may affect distribution over the coming days. There is the risk of a transport strike on Friday—and we hope that there is no impact on distribution.”

The TWU continues to insist that, as the union outlined at its national council meeting in May, Toll, and Australia’s other multi-billion dollar fleet operators are victims of “the major retailers, the manufacturers, the oil companies, the banks, who sweat the trucking companies and the owner drivers.”

TWU New South Wales (NSW) state secretary Richard Olsen said this week: “We should not forget that the squeeze comes from clients at the top like Amazon whose profits ballooned 224 percent to \$11 billion in just the first quarter this year. The TWU fight is about holding these companies to account and stopping the ‘race to the bottom’ that sees bankruptcies and a lowering of standards for the small business operator.”

This utterly disingenuous attempt to equate major logistics companies with troubled small businesses serves only as a cynical attempt to justify the close alignment of the TWU with management.

It is also an entirely nationalist agenda that “Australian” companies (notwithstanding the 2015 sale of Toll to Japan Post) must be defended against their purportedly more competitive and powerful international rivals. This only serves to pit workers in Australia against the working class internationally. The assault on the wages, conditions and very lives of transport workers is being conducted throughout every country and it is among these workers that support must be fought for, not the Australian ruling class.

Alongside the Toll dispute, 6,000 drivers at StarTrack and FedEx and 2,000 workers at Linfox are also in the process of voting on whether to carry out strike action. Workers at all of these major logistics companies confront similar issues and the

TWU’s staggered approach to the disputes can only be seen as a ploy to isolate workers and limit the impact of strikes on the supply chain as a whole.

The conduct of Australia’s unions, including the TWU, over the last 15 months stands as a stark warning for workers of the perfidious role played by these organisations. From the outset of the pandemic, the unions have been at the forefront of a major assault on the working class.

Australian Council of Trade Unions boss Sally McManus and her “best friend forever,” then Attorney-General Christian Porter, were the architects of the JobKeeper wage subsidy, a \$90 billion handout to big business which granted employers unprecedented powers to restructure their workforces.

When NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian belatedly announced tightened movement restrictions for workers in Sydney’s COVID-19 “hotspots,” the TWU was among the most eager and vociferous defenders, not of workers’ health and safety, but of the unimpeded operations and profitability of big business.

Within hours of the July 17 announcement, the TWU demanded: “ALL essential transport workers must be automatically exempt from panicked snap restrictions from the NSW Government.”

This callous subjugation of the health of workers, their families, and the population as a whole to corporate profit interests is a sharp demonstration that workers cannot entrust their fate to the TWU or any other union.

A genuine struggle for trucking workers’ rights and conditions can only go forward through a break with the union and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, to unite workers across the sector, along with their colleagues at other trucking companies, Australia Post and throughout logistics. These essential supply-chain and delivery companies should be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That requires a fight for a workers’ government and socialism.



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